

Immerse Day 60 :: April 23

The story of Balaam is a seriously odd story. From talking donkeys to angel assassins, from foreigners as prophets of God to God's mysterious rage, this story is full of things we either can't understand or have a really hard time believing. And I'm with you! I don't have answers to most of the questions this reading asks, nor do I think it would be good for me to give them if I had them. The best way for us to read scripture is not just to understand it, but to sit with God in the incomprehensible. It helps to keep us humble, recognizing that we are not God and will not understand much in scripture.

So I just want to talk about one aspect of this story and leave the rest to you to pray over, discern, learn, and ultimately use to find contentment in our ignorance.

We've been looking for 4 books now for Jesus sightings, times in these readings when we see Jesus show up in the Old Testament. We've seen Him in the garden, when God promises that the serpent (the devil we assume) will "strike His heel but He will crush the serpent's head." We've seen Him in the ram, provided as a sacrifice, a substitute for Isaac when Abraham needs a sacrificial offering. Again and again we've seen Jesus show up in scripture, and praise God for that.

But today, we see another character with whom we're all too familiar. As Balaam rides his donkey after the king of Moab, he is confronted three times by "an angel of the Lord" with a drawn sword, ready to strike Balaam down. I don't want to get in to the assumptions we have to make to decide why God is so angry with Balaam for doing exactly what God has asked him to do. But take a closer look at this angel. In the Greek rendering of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, the name for this angel is "the Adversary" or ο σαταν. If you don't read Greek, this is "satan". Yup, the devil himself, sitting on a road with a sword ready to kill Balaam AT GOD'S COMMAND!

We have such a hard time with the early parts of Job because Satan seems to be coming for God's permission to do nasty things to Job, and God allows it. Here, we see an even more complicated relationship between God and Satan, where Satan seems to be employed by God for dastardly deeds.

So what do we do with this? We've been taught that Satan is, if not an opposite to God, then at least an enemy. We've literally demonized the devil as a fallen angel who is responsible for all the bad on the planet. But the Old Testament makes it pretty clear that we don't need any help messing up our own lives, those of others, and our world. From Noah to the desert wanderings, we see that we can't blame the hardships in our lives on the devil when we've caused them ourselves. In fact, maybe Satan is just another angel that God sends to bring His messages and do His work. The Old Testament sure seems to say so, even when the Gospels clearly don't.

More ignorance and uncomfortable unknowing to sit in with God. Sigh.